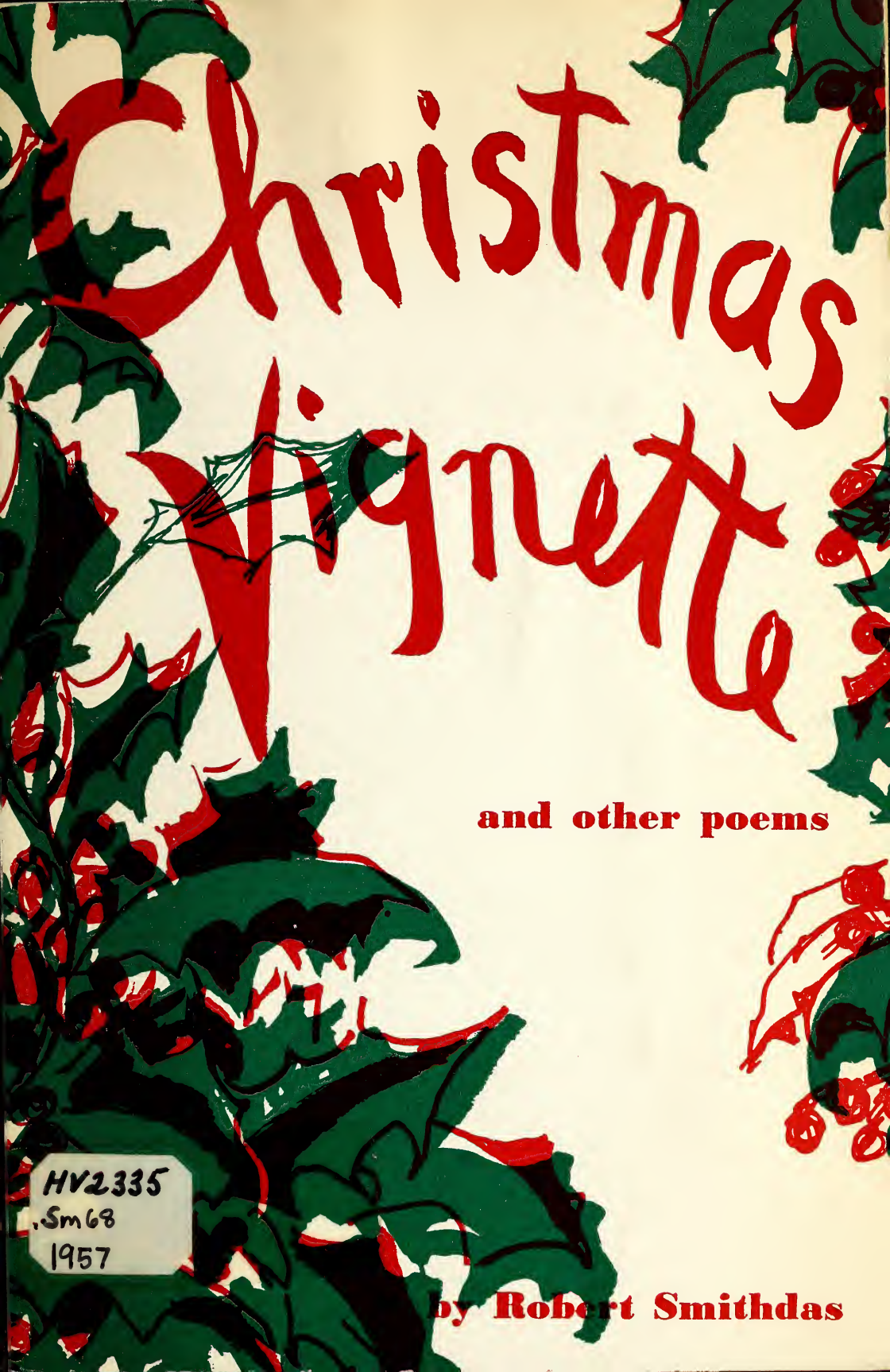

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A CHRISTMAS VIGNETTE and other poems

by

ROBERT SMITHDAS

vol. 3

in the series, "There is a Silver Lining"

Illustrations and Cover by Vincent Bruno

published by the
INDUSTRIAL HOME FOR THE BLIND
57 Willoughby Street, Brooklyn 1, New York

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These poems by Robert Smithdas are part of the series, "There is a Silver Lining," which seeks to demonstrate the sensitivity to surroundings and the reactions of a man both deaf and blind. The publication is offered with warmest gratitude to the generous friends and patrons of the Industrial Home for the Blind.

the publishers

printed in the U.S.A.
by the Liberal Press, Inc.
357

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ROBERT J. SMITHDAS

counselor to the Community Relations Department of the Industrial Home for the Blind and permanent secretary of the I. H. B. League

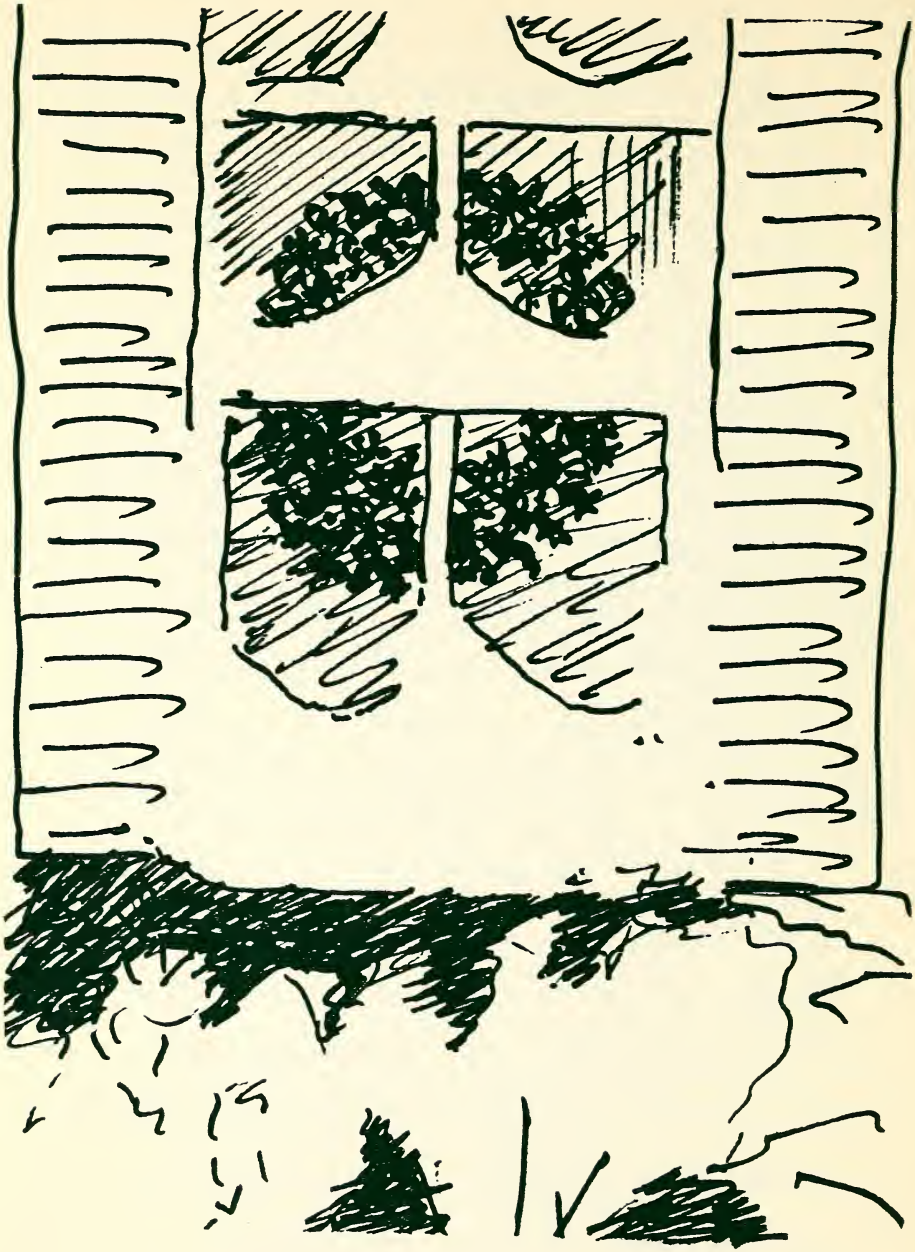
DEDICATION . . . TO THE MANY KIND FRIENDS who have made my work, and the work of the Industrial Home for the Blind, possible.

R. S.

A Perfect Day

All of us have experienced that delightful sense of completeness which comes at the end of a perfect day. It may not have been the happiest day of our lives; yet, for some intangible reason, we know a profound sense of satisfaction and contentment. Life seems so wonderful in its abundance of blessings, and even our failures of the day are diminished by a feeling of well-being and fulfillment.

Day that I've loved, I hold you close to me,
Knowing that each winged hour that you have given
Has been a priceless gift to me from heaven,
Small golden fragments of Eternity
Moulded, and shaped, and radiantly gleaming
With all the beauty and delight I've known;
Rich with the seeds of friendship I have sown,
Laughter, and love, and life beyond my dreaming.
I'll press you to my heart; and, like a flower
Plucked from the fields of summer, you shall be
A bright remembrance for the coming years.
And now as night steals down with all its power,
I shall dream of your laughter, not your tears,
And wake with morning, smiling happily.



A Christmas Vignette

There is no season of the year which lifts the heart so high as Christmas time. In the gay colors and spicy fragrances of evergreen, holly and mistletoe; and in the remembrance of our friends and loved ones, we find an aura of happiness unsurpassed by even the joyousness of springtime. And we remember, too, that Christmas is the birthday of a Child who had only the stars in the midnight sky to decorate His heart, and the fire of an exuberant love to keep it warm against a cold December night.

Tonight my thoughts go wandering astray
To other nights like this, all stars and snow,
With faint bells pealing hymns that they will play
Until the world grows old and gray and slow.
And as I hang gay sprigs of mistletoe
And glossy wreaths of holly on each door
And frosty window, lit with candle-glow,
My musing mind is filled with tender lore
Of shepherds kneeling on a straw-strewn floor
Beside a manger-bed in Galilee;
And once again, as oftentimes before,
I feel the quick, warm surge of ecstasy—
For this one night of mingled love and joy
Pays homage to a smiling little Boy.

The quality of courage is an inherent possession which belongs to all of us. It is expressed in thoughts and actions many times each day, but we are not always aware of it. What we remember best are deeds of gallantry and outstanding heroism; we tend to overlook the quiet force which often impels us to strive against hopelessness and the impossible.

Courage

Courage can be such quiet, nameless things—
The patient things that strive when hope seems lost:
The first frail flower that dares the last sharp frost;
The bird that seeks the sky on crippled wings;
A valiant heart that smiles, though each day brings
Some fresh defeat, some sorrow unforeseen;
All things that toil against despair, yet glean
Something of joy from life's deep, hidden springs.
A flame burns brighter when strong winds
are blowing;
It leaps into the shadows, and its fire
Gathers more light to push the darkness out.
So courage is like the flame: intensely glowing,
Kindled from hope, and fanned by the desire
To put the darkness of the soul to rout.

Dedicated to Peter J. Salmon

Friendship is undoubtedly our most valuable human relationship. Most of us have several friends in whom we place our complete trust, confide our secret ambitions, and to whom we turn for advice and comfort. Without such dependence on others, life would hold nothing but loneliness for us.

To A Friend

There is a quiet corner of my heart,
Bright as a sunlit garden, fresh with dew,
A special place that I have kept apart
For all the dear ones that I love; and you
Are always there, among those friendly faces,
Smiling, and kind, and marvelously wise,
Sharing the hopes and dreams my heart embraces,
With an understanding twinkle in your eyes.
Dear Friend, I know that I shall never find
Those golden terms love sometimes leaves behind.
Your friendship has brought happiness to me;
And, grateful for your steadfast loyalty,
I shall be faithful to you, all my days;
Speak proudly of you; crown your name with praise.

Touch

Unconsciously, all of us use our hands in expressing strong emotions or even the tenor of a passing mood. Voltaire, for one, believed that the gestures of the hands are more poignant than the changing expressions of the face. I find it fascinating to watch the movements of hands, no matter how imperceptible they may seem; for the hands are always restless, always expressive.

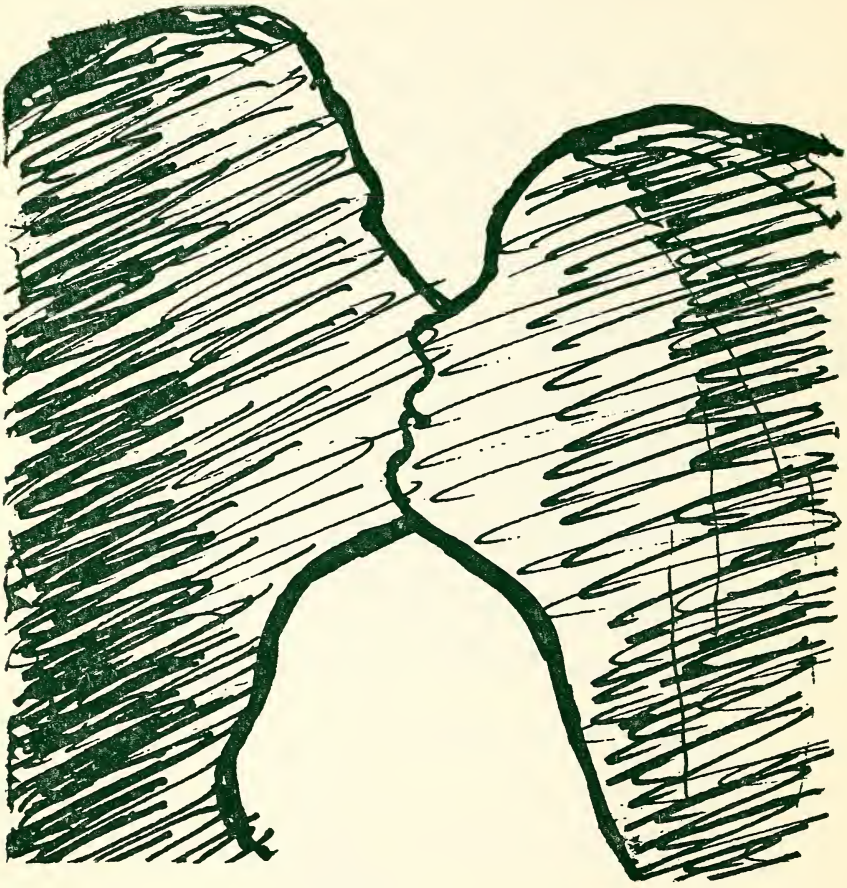
There is no need to speak; I understand
Each quick, impulsive movement of your hand.
By some strange magic of the heart, I guess
The meaning of each gesture, each caress.
Your fingers can be gentle, gay, or kind;
Or fierce when anger flickers in your mind.
Or they can trace, with such exquisite grace,
The tenderness love mirrors in your face.

I have always liked lilacs—no other flower so fully symbolizes the essence of spring for me. In April or May, when my parents used to take me to visit my godfather's farm near Latrobe, Pennsylvania, there were always lilacs in bloom along the country roads. I still remember those purple and white blossoms vividly.

Lilacs

Even before I knew them by their name,
I loved their fragrance on the winds of spring;
And, long before the rose burst into flame,
I knew that summer days were beckoning.
Purple and white against the pale spring sky,
Tossing on whip-thin boughs with every breeze,
They bid the sleepy winter months goodbye,
And fill the waiting air with prophesies.
Lilacs, lilacs, blooming everywhere
Along the old stone walls of country lanes,
Spring has not come until the winds can snare
Their sunburnt incense over hills and plains.

While studying at the University of Michigan one summer, I met a charming girl in whose company I spent many happy hours. I was a shy young man then, extremely self-conscious and aloof, but her innate friendliness soon dispelled my natural diffidence. We became intimate friends, and I wrote this poem as a mark of my affectionate regard for her.



In A Whisper

Rich and beautiful is my love, my dearest—

As soft and pure as snow that falls on snow;

Sweet as mulled wine that holds the candle's glow,

That warms the blood and sparkles in the eyes.

And the great white stars shall dim with age,
my dearest,

And all earth's winds shall sigh themselves to sleep;

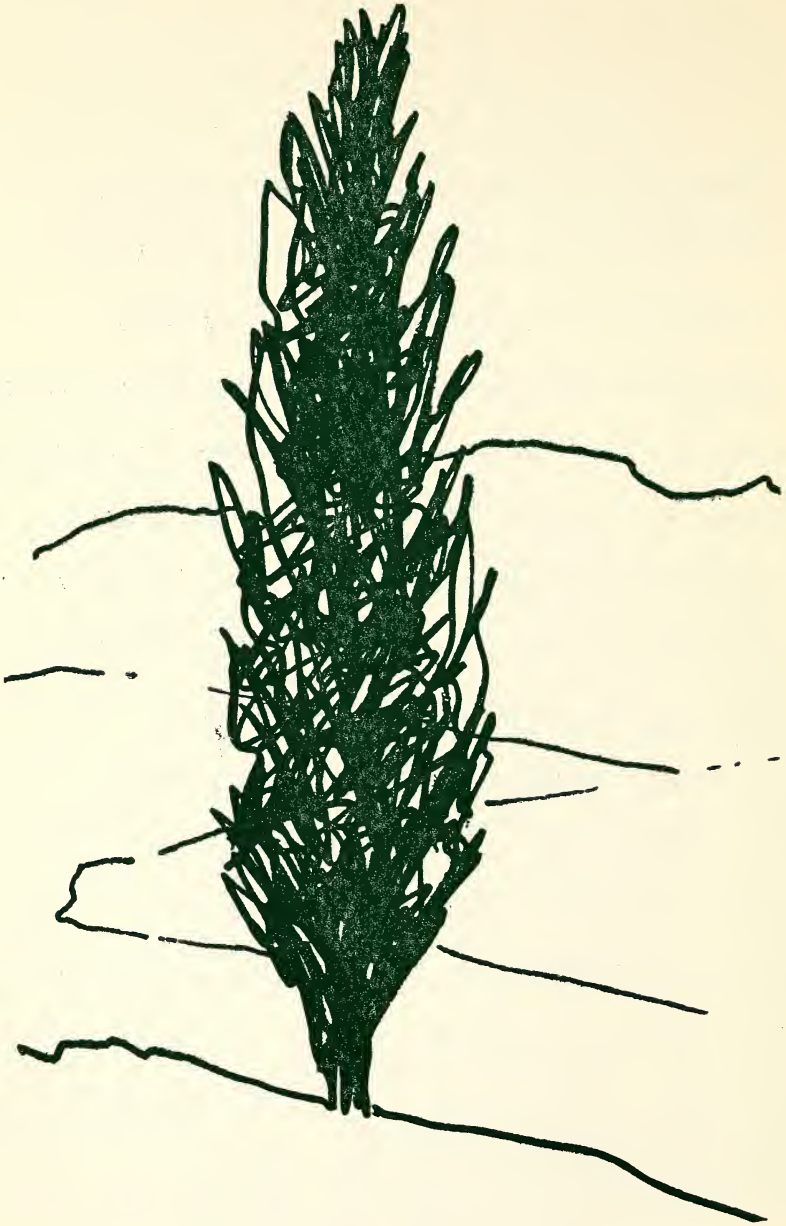
Then, like a whispered prayer, my love shall leap

Straight through the gilded gates of Paradise.

Twice a year—during my summer vacation and again at Christmastime—I visit my old home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. During the long intervals between such visits, I often find occasion to review my memories of that city; and, even though they are almost always fragmentary pictures of my childhood there, I am always acutely conscious that the city of my birth plays an important role in my life. I realize, however, that such a feeling of nostalgia is common to all of us, for the spirit of the home town never entirely deserts us.

Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh, my city, when I left your hills,
Cradled between long ribbons of blue rivers,
I carried in my heart those soft gray frills
Of smoke that used to dance, with little shivers,
Against your dawns and sunset skies. And though
I was only a child then, still across the years
I hear the song of your hammers, see the glow
Of your roaring fires, burning red and fierce.
My city with the heart of molten steel,
Close to your clamor and incessant flame,
I drew my first long quivering breath of birth.
High mountains lie between us, yet I feel
That yours shall always be a precious name—
My childhood home, the dearest town on earth!



Often, during my career as a lecturer, some one in the audience has asked: "When did you feel most discouraged by your disabilities? Are you ever discouraged?"

The question has always been an interesting one for me, but I have never been able to discover an answer which was wholly satisfactory to myself, nor adequate enough to offer to my listeners. Discouragement is a mood which passes as stealthily as it comes, and I prefer to ignore it, rather than define it.

Triumph

Because God chose for me this somber fate
Of darkness centered in a world of light,
And silence where the earth's rich songs pulsate,
I felt that I must turn away in flight—
Fly from the shadows, brooding day and night,
And the strange stillness, deep and desolate,
Where only scattered memories were bright,
And only broken songs could penetrate.
I do not know exactly how it happened,
But suddenly, as if a door had opened,
I felt a warm glow in my heart, and heard
A trumpet voice cry: "Courage!" Then I stirred
The silver embers of my dreams to fire,
And played a song of triumph on life's lyre.

Swimming is a wonderful sensation, and one which nearly everyone enjoys thoroughly. The buoyancy of the water makes one feel infinitely lighter; there is a stimulating sensation of cleanliness and well-being; and, above all, the physical exhilaration of swimming gives one the feeling that he has left the ordinary problems of life behind him on the beach. To be conscious of only simple, elemental things—the wind and sun and water—is exhilarating and revitalizing.

Swimmer

Between bright worlds of water and sun,
Light as a leaf, I float along,
Feeling the warmth and coolness run
All through my being, like a song.
The sun twines warm fingers in my hair;
The wind sings out, a lilting tune;
Under my heart, the waters share
My own delight, and softly croon.
With a firm, strong stroke I thrust apart
The laughing ripples to either side;
Exultant, carefree, and gay of heart,
Through a sea of gold and green I glide.

Imagination was meant to be used to find beauty in the commonplace phenomena of life. Even in the unrestrained violence of a storm, once we have given full reign to our imaginations, there is always hidden music and beauty. It is my profound belief that we were intended to admire the power and mutability of Nature, and to find in natural forces an expression of deeper significance.

Storm

The wind sings a thousand choruses
From wide worlds of time and space;
It plays the season's symphony
Against my face.
Thunder is like a roll of drums
Down the causeways of the sky;
It stirs my blood, and lifts my heart
Like a battle-cry.
And water has a silver chime
In the cool, quick beat of rain;
Each raindrop rings a tiny bell,
Then falls again.
There is such music in a storm,
In the wind, and rain, and thunder;
And it echoes sharply in my soul—
A song of wonder.

While reading a book written by M. Coue, a prominent French physician who lived during the early part of this century, I came upon a single positive sentence which struck me as most unusual. "To attain happiness, one must resolve to be happy." Such conscious efforts are seldom used by most of us—but I am not at all certain in my own mind that they are entirely wasted. Even the intention to smile can brighten a despondent mood.

A Resolution

All day I shall be happy; for today,
As soon as I meet the sun, and feel its dart
Sending new warmth and gladness through my heart
I shall be foolishly wise, impulsive, gay.
I'll seed the hours with tiny buds of love,
Even for trifling things, so that they seem
Like crushed jewels from some rare,
enraptured dream
That only the hands of angels ever wove.
For I shall find beauty in the roughest stone,
Music in silence, magic in plain words,
And every stranger shall seem a friend to me.
I shall be like St. Francis of Assisi:
In love with winds and waters, and wild birds,
And call the whole wide universe my own.

A Vision

Often our dreams are so vivid, so fraught with poignant imagery, that we remember them long afterward. Here is one of my dreams, transposed into a sonnet, almost exactly as I dreamed it long ago.

I stormed the gates of sunset with a prayer;
And after I had fallen asleep, I dreamed
That I saw an angel with long, shining hair,
Smiling, and clad in flowing robes that gleamed
With the light of a thousand stars. And in her hands
She held three gifts: Wisdom, that was a book;
Riches, that was a chart of golden lands;
And Love, that was nothing but a tender look.
"What will you choose?" she asked me—and I sighed,
Yearning for all that makes one rich and wise—
But I chose love, because I craved it so.
It was a dream; it happened long ago;
Yet from that choice I made with sleeping eyes,
My prayer was answered—even magnified!

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